

A Closer Look

Giving Strategically After a Disaster



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In Brief

- **2017 was the costliest year on record for natural disasters — more than \$300 billion in the U.S. alone — and 2018 could well bring more of the same. That means lives lost, homes destroyed, and devastated communities in desperate need of the most basic necessities.**
- **While many people want to give in the wake of such disasters, they are often unsure about how to do so most effectively. When is the best time to give? Should you give cash or send supplies? Which organizations should you trust?**
- **Rather than responding reactively to each disaster as it happens, taking the time to conduct basic research, answer some key questions, and develop a strategic approach to giving can often yield more meaningful results.**

A Little Planning Can Make a Big Difference

Natural disasters are an unfortunate fact of life. Each year, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, wildfires, mudslides, volcanic eruptions, and other catastrophes wreak havoc on communities, taking lives, destroying property, and leaving survivors in desperate need of food, water, shelter, medical care, and other support.

In the immediate aftermath of such widespread devastation, many people feel compelled to help, especially if the disaster happened in or near their local community. Often, they want to make charitable donations, but they are not always sure about exactly when, where, and what to give — and how to have the greatest impact.

Being aware of the overwhelming urge to give in a purely reactive way directly after a catastrophe occurs can help avoid pitfalls. Taking the time to conduct basic research and answer some key questions about the timing, recipients, and designations of your contributions can lead to more thoughtful decisions and the satisfaction of knowing your gift is making a real impact. In this piece, we explore the main considerations involved in developing a strategic approach to giving in the wake of a natural disaster and offer some useful resources and helpful advice.

When Is the Best Time to Give?

When a disaster strikes, many people want to respond right away, and understandably so, but should providing immediate aid be the primary way for you to assist an affected community? Often not. So when should you give? Disaster relief can be divided into three basic phases:

- **Phase 1: Immediate relief.** Emergency first responders and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) both engage in relief work in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Typically, first responders take responsibility for evacuations, first aid, clearing and assessing buildings and other structures, and other urgent needs. NGOs often assist by providing needed supplies — such as food, water, and clothing — and temporary shelter.
- **Phase 2: Recovery and rebuilding support.** After critical food, temporary shelter, and other needs have been met in the days and weeks after a disaster, communities begin to recover and rebuild in earnest. This often includes repairing or building permanent physical structures and the gradual restoration of stability and normalcy to the affected community. This phase can last months or even years.

- **Phase 3: Disaster preparedness.** Unfortunately, hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, and other disasters are recurring. While these catastrophes cannot be prevented, risks can be mitigated, and damage can be reduced. Phase 3 focuses on these long-range efforts — research studies, ongoing community preparedness education, removal of potential hazards to the community, and policies and procedures — to diminish the negative effects of future disasters.

Not surprisingly, most people give immediately following a disaster, during Phase 1. Not only is the suffering of large numbers of people at its most acute, but media attention is also at its greatest.

In Phase 2, when the rebuilding starts, both media attention and donations to relief organizations tend to drop sharply. This is unfortunate, since it can take considerable time — often many months — to gauge the full range and extent of a community's needs, and studies show that giving during this phase is crucial.

Phase 3, disaster preparedness, receives the least amount of giving by far, despite its potential to save lives and alleviate suffering from future disasters. The numbers here are stark. According to a 2011 report by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, almost two-thirds of all charitable giving in the wake of a disaster occurs within the first two months, and by the six-month mark, virtually all giving stops.

Of course, giving during any phase of disaster relief is important, but if you are looking to direct your efforts to areas of greatest need, you might consider giving recovery and rebuilding support, or a mix of immediate and longer-range support.

Where Should You Give?

In the wake of a disaster, selecting an organization to support can be daunting. Vetting the numerous local and national options, including the many new charities that spring up in the immediate wake of a disaster, can be overwhelming — especially considering the immediacy and extent of the need and the sense of urgency we all feel at these times. What should you do?

Find an area of focus. You might find it helpful to link your disaster relief efforts with areas of personal interest and experience — say, housing, education, or public or mental health. You might also focus on a specific population, such as older adults or children.

Choose an organization to support. You may already have an established personal connection with organizations that have affiliates serving in the affected community — a faith-based organization, school, hospital, or other charitable organization. Maybe you even sit on the board of a not-for-profit that is already providing relief to the impacted area.

Community foundations: an effective way to give in all phases of disaster relief. When you don't have an organization that you know or trust already, we often recommend giving to community foundations serving

Leveraging Personal Connections: Lessons From Puerto Rico

On September 20, 2017, only two weeks after Hurricane Irma had caused damage across Florida and the Caribbean, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico with devastating force, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives, severe property damage, the widespread loss of electricity, and millions of people without food, water, and shelter.

While many people rushed to give in the aftermath, immense barriers existed as media reports made it clear that distributing critical supplies to affected communities was becoming a serious issue.

For one Bessemer family foundation client, the most effective way of providing assistance proved to be through a long-standing relationship with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, which has affiliates in Puerto Rico. They were able to navigate logistical roadblocks and provide direct support to local affiliates. While the Boys and Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico had suffered damage to their 13 facilities in the storms, staff and volunteers were able to respond quickly and efficiently to the catastrophe. The clubs served as emergency provisions distribution centers for local communities, as staff went door to door, delivering food, water, and clothing, and assessing damages. And three weeks after Hurricane Maria, they also resumed serving youth in their centers with hot meals and expanded hours to offset school closures.

the impacted region. In many cases, these organizations have been working in the affected community for decades and have knowledge, expertise, and community connections that are unlikely to be matched by large national relief organizations or charities formed in direct response to the disaster. Community foundations can often mobilize funding immediately by funneling support to local grantees that have the capacity to distribute food and water, and provide shelter and other types of relief. Moreover, community foundations will often reserve funds to deploy over time or direct donations to rebuilding efforts once they've received sufficient funding for immediate relief.

Community foundations are familiar with the reputations of local organizations, maintain internal infrastructure to conduct due diligence on grantees, and have the capacity to track how funds are spent — all of which should provide additional reassurance that your gift will be used wisely.

In addition, if you're also interested in providing disaster preparedness support, giving through community foundations can be effective because foundation leaders often have strong relationships with local elected officials.

Keep in mind that more than one community foundation may be operating in an impacted region. When it comes to identifying a specific community foundation or relief organization to support, Bessemer's philanthropic advisory team publishes briefings shortly following disasters with lists of well-vetted charities providing relief to affected communities, in addition to being available as a resource for questions and guidance.

You can conduct your own research by visiting community foundation websites or contacting disaster relief organizations directly. You'll want to find financially stable, well-structured organizations with a documented history of successful work in disaster relief or recovery. It should also generally be clear how and when donated funds will be used, and how results will be assessed, including when more qualitative, or "softer," metrics are used.

Even if it's not possible to invest a great deal of time in personal research, you can still make informed decisions. The Center for Disaster Philanthropy

(disasterphilanthropy.org), for instance, provides timely information and specific ways to give, including lists of community foundations; it also creates "recovery funds" for domestic and international disasters. Some other resources include National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (nvoad.org) and InterAction (interaction.org), both of which provide lists of organizations working in affected communities.

The donor-advised fund (DAF) option. Another way to give following a disaster, particularly when you're unsure of which organization to support and need more time to evaluate potential organizations, is through a donor-advised fund. With a DAF, you can make your contribution and then recommend distributing the funds over time to different organizations.

Quick Tips for Giving Safely, Efficiently, and Effectively

- **Take your time in the face of urgent, emotional appeals for aid — made in person, by phone, or online via email or (especially) social media.** Scams may be rare, but they do happen. For email in particular, for your own protection, avoid clicking on any links and instead go to websites directly.
- **Be wary of claims that "every cent of every donation" goes to direct aid.** This can be a red flag. No one wants to see donations wasted, but all charities must devote some of their funds to administration and other costs of running their organization. While a community foundation may sometimes allow for 100% of donations to go to disaster support, this arrangement should be evaluated carefully.
- **Consider avoiding telephone solicitations:** These requests may well be legitimate, but they are frequently made by for-profit companies hired by charities; the cost of this service inevitably reduces the amount of your donation that actually reaches the charity you're helping.
- **Donating by text message is only faster for you.** Donations made via text message are not immediate; in fact, it can take up to 90 days to reach the intended organization.
- **Donate cash.** Unrestricted cash gifts allow receiving organizations to provide what's most needed quickly and efficiently.

What Should You Give?

Rather than buying a case of water or donating clothes or household items, it's always preferable to donate cash in all phases of disaster relief. Giving of in-kind donations always incurs travel costs — costs that can sometimes be astronomically high and far exceed the value of the donations themselves. There is also the potential for logistical problems that can delay or prevent delivery — or, worse, interfere with the delivery of other high-priority items. We've all read the heartbreaking stories about crates of food and clothing stranded and rotting in ports, or planes with critical supplies that cannot land because the runway is already clogged with donations of low-priority or even wholly inappropriate items.

Giving cash is actually the most thoughtful, compassionate, and useful type of donation, particularly if you make your gift unrestricted. Recipient organizations will have the flexibility to direct your donation where it's needed most urgently; they can buy and distribute the right items quickly and efficiently. They may even be able to allocate part of your gift to longer-term recovery and preparedness if they receive all the needed funding for immediate relief.

As an additional benefit, cash donations allow relief organizations to purchase supplies from merchants in the affected communities, helping to strengthen local economies.

Your Giving Can Be Thoughtful, Effective, and Timely

Philanthropy is often an emotional experience, and especially so when it comes to giving in the wake of disasters; however, reacting in an impulsive way to each disaster as it happens isn't always the most effective approach. Moreover, given the large number of extreme weather events that happen each year, it's not really possible to respond in a meaningful way to every disaster that occurs.

Rather, consider developing a strategic plan for your annual giving. At the beginning of each year, you and your family can determine your approach to giving and how much you want to allocate to disaster relief. Bessemer's philanthropic advisors can answer any questions you may have, discuss different ways to give, and help you to craft a strategic approach to giving that works for you and makes a lasting impact on the lives of those affected by natural disasters.

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